

Excellence in customer experience through CIM and a customer centric attitude

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Dr. M.B. Athreya who advises Indian firms and MNCs on vision, strategic planning and human resource development and is widely recognized as one of the founders and pioneers of the Indian management movement speaks to **Poornima Kavlekar** about customer interaction management and the role “Custommerce” is going to play in improving customer experience.

Question: Today’s customer is mobile, more educated, demanding and has a fast changing lifestyle. Customers are also becoming faceless for an organization. So what should be the strategies for an organization to improve and enhance customer interaction experience and earn customer loyalty and achieve a customer driven economy?

Companies must first understand the customer and their needs. This can be done by observing, listening, surveys etc. Then segment the customer population and go deeper into the needs of each segment, such as the more mobile, the better educated. Companies must recognize that almost all the segments of customers are becoming more demanding as their expectations rise and competitors offer more. And companies must deliver the service where customers want it.

Question: Customer relationship is still a myth in India considering the piling files of customer complaints against banking and telecom companies at state consumer welfare tribunals. Please comment.

The concept of “customer relationship” itself will always be relevant. Some of the claims of high customer satisfaction may not be valid. Indeed, there are many dissatisfied customers with complaints. At the same time, some companies are trying to improve their service levels, by improving their CIM, customer interaction management systems, processes, attitudes and skills. Satisfied customers speak less. Both external competition and internal awareness of the cost-benefit is driving more companies towards better CIM.

Question: The role of automated customer services has become popular. However, customers require tremendous interpersonal interaction. How can companies strike a balance between automation and personalization of customer service?

The Indian economy is growing at 8 percent plus; industry at 12 percent; some sectors at 16 percent; leading companies at 25 percent plus. To cope with such growth, it is often not economical to add more human resources. Fortunately, very good communication and information technologies are available to cope with the rising load. Setting up call centres is part of such CIM. Many customers are on the move; busy; short of time; working 24/7. They are quite happy to get service over the phone, even from an automated system. What the company needs to do is that at the end of the system, a human interface should be available, if needed. If the customer’s query/need is not fully met by the automated steps and he/she stays on the line, a human agent should come on the respond warmly.

Question: “Custommerce” has recently formed an advisory panel with eminent personalities. What are your plans for steering this movement?

The “Custommerce” panel has the mission of creating awareness in Indian organizations for excellence in customer experience through better CIM and a customer centric attitude. The long term vision is to help India become a Customer Driver Economy (CDE). The Panel will pursue this mission and vision

through awareness creating local sessions on CIM, CC and CDE at different cities of the country, four regional conferences on these themes, an annual national conference sharing Indian and global case studies in pursuing excellence in customer experience. Alongside the above events, it will continue to document knowledge on CIM, through case studies etc. and develop metrics to help companies to measure and self-assess their progress towards better CIM.

Question: What have been the achievements of 'Custommerce' since its inception?

Custommerce already has significant achievements to its credit. The idea emerged about three years ago. It is a blend of two crucial elements for a high growth emerging economy like India – better care of the customer and the growth of viable Commerce. The new term, not yet in the dictionary, "Custommerce" came from the union of these two words. Custommerce has already held three annual conferences, and a few regional meets, with national and international participation, both among the delegates and the speakers. There is also a website with updated news and some publications such as the Seven Laws of Custommerce. All this has created and deepened awareness. More firms are re-visiting their CIM technologies, systems, skills, processes and culture. It is this incubation and progress that has enabled Custommerce to attract the eminent Panel, and formally launch it.

Question: How do you see the role of IT evolving in coming years in the customer interaction industry?

IT is pervading our life and has a crucial role to play in the CIM space. Different customers, as per their convenience, contact a company, for service, through different modes – phone call; email; fax; letter; personal visit etc. The company needs a robust system to log all such data; prioritize the seriousness and urgency to the various customer issues, identify the agents to respond and so on. IT provides such systems. The channel capacities and speed of communication as well as computing speed and software capabilities are constantly rising.

Question: Joint venture debacles like the Hutch-Essar feud or the Jet-Air Sahara spat leave a looming sense of uncertainty among shareholders and consumer, thereby delaying or calling off purchase decisions. How can companies undo the damage?

Organic, internal projects themselves are often difficult to implement. Companies tend to be caught up with operations and details. Joint ventures are, understandably, even harder. Both parties need a certain level of maturity, relationship management and business skills. When either or both parties are dissatisfied, despite efforts to resolve issues, it may be better to separate. That should be done as amicably as possible. Similarly, when the acquirer feels strongly that the price is too high, or the acquiree thinks it is too low, it is better to call off the acquisition. However, we should not lose perspective. There are many JVs that do work well. When regulatory or business logic makes the JV obsolete, the two parties are not to be blamed. They need not worry about a few failing deals.

Question: Price war at an introductory phase is an unhealthy strategy yet aviation companies are resorting to them as a means of sustaining their market share. What according to you would be the future growth drivers for such companies?

India has shifted from a licensing-rationing paradigm to a competition paradigm. The policy framework is more concerned with customer interest, than in protecting promoters and jobs. Management and labour will be amply rewarded by satisfying and delighting the customer. Some airlines are charging low fares to gain market share. They may believe that in the medium to long run they will be profitable. They have to take the consequences, plus and minus. The civil aviation industry could go through shake up and consolidation. On balance, it is better to have a bit more competition, than oligopoly, or, even worse, monopoly.